Chains

BY LAURA SPENCER PORTOR

WAS that . . . ?

Yes! That was Marion's step, long waited for! Helena McGrath rose from her low chair by the window in quick startled recognition of it. She stood listening, an intent instant. Yes, it was Marion, of course, who else?

Yet it was not Marion's step, after all, that she was listening for so acutely, rather the kind of step . . . slow, tired, indifferent, or less slow, less tired, less indifferent than it had been. That was the important matter.

Then, finding herself standing there so intently listening, with her bit of sewing still in her hands, she seated herself again hurriedly, and bent over her stitches. What an absurd thing it was for her to have done, to get to her feet like that in a startled way, with a bit of sewing in her hands! Of late she had caught herself often doing just such absurd things; as one catches a child doing a thing absently, without meaning, or in a way he cannot account for. Sensible mothers do not behave in that foolish headless manner—the way a girl of sixteen might behave! Fancy her getting to her feet all in an instant like that, with her heart beating, beating, beating, and her sense of hearing opening out suddenly like a wind-blown door, and all this at the mere click of a latch—and with her sewing in her hands!

Yes, if one is a mother one must behave like a mother—not like a girl of sixteen. When would she ever be rid of these frequent absurdities of hers, when would she be consistently what she ought to be—a real everyday mother, with a mother's practicality and common sense?

Well, no, God defend her, and God preserve to her her more romantic idea of motherhood! She longed to be not merely a mother—she wanted to fulfil her own destiny. She wanted to be Marion's mother. She longed to be to Marion everything that an ideal mother could be. Especially now.

She put her hair back from her forehead with one slim hand—the one with the wedding ring on it, and bent with new resolution to her stitches. Marion had gone down the hall, to the pantry; presumably to see if there were cookies there. Well, there were. Marion would stuff some in the pocket of her sweater, and presently, presently, she would be here, in this very room. A sort of sentimental terror assailed Helena as she put her needle in and out. How was she to be to Marion what she wanted to be; and what precisely did she want to be?

Once she had tried to explain one of her indefinite longings of another sort to her husband; and he had listened patiently while she had tried to fit gossamer into words, inarticulate silences of long duration into immediate sentences—and had succeeded only, at the last, in throwing him a look of pitiful appeal. And he had said to her, with that dreadful directness of his, the directness of men who take almost a kind of pride in their inability to understand women: "But Helena! Good Lord! What *is* it you *want*?"

He had gone to his grave, indeed, without ever having quite made out what it was his wife "wanted." She remembered this now, without resentment. There was little wonder he had not been able to fathom what she

wanted; for in all these six years since his death she had not been able to fathom it fully herself.

Her mind turned wearily from its own indefiniteness and from her husband's remembered words. She knew now what it was she wanted—she wanted motherhood that really was motherhood. This affair of Marion's with young Hervey Whitridge—this affair so indefinite, so only partly guessed by Helena, but so lingeringly surmized, was held now like a light flickering across a dim passage, revealingly. Yes, that was what she wanted: she wanted to be the kind of mother (Her acute ear was remarking meanwhile the fact that Marion's approaching step was *not* less listless)—the kind of mother to whom a daughter is drawn as steel to a magnet, sure, true, confident; instead of which she and Marion lived in the same house always missing each other; their lives never really touching; like strangers almost; strangers at least who respect each other, but could never be intimates.

"Intimates!" that was the very word! Intimacy! How far she and Marion were from it. She had found in books from time to time a relation such as she had in mind; and the finding of it was like the sound of a far-off bell, summoning all her possibilities. In a Russian novel, left at the house by mistake by some one who was making a study of Russian novelists for a literary club meeting, she had come by chance, turning the page, upon a mother and daughter who were vividly, really, mother and daughter. The girl had some love affair that the mother divined, and they talked of it, and their two hearts ran together like water. But in books, the relation was different, especially in Russian books, for in these there were words of endearment used easily, commonly, that American mothers would never dream of using. "*Golubchik*"—was that it? Or was it another? She had forgotten—that meant "dear heart," "my darling," "beloved one," "little pigeon." Yes, "little pigeon!" Fancy there being real daughters like that, in a foreign land, who would fling themselves weeping on their mother's hearts; and mothers who could smooth their daughters' hair and say, "There! there! little pigeon! my darling!" Fancy, being as free as that! Fancy knowing nothing of inarticulateness, nothing of these terrible chains of timidity and pride and silence unbreakable that bound her and Marion and kept them dreadfully yearningly apart! Imagine! if there were no chains at all! Think of that!

Marion's hand was on the door now. Then as it opened, listlessly, the bright beauty of her, familiar to her mother as the bright beauty of the moon, was gradually revealed. Yet it was dimmed, too, by the unmistakable tiredness—that visible evidence of the secret something which Marion was bearing alone.

"Hello, mother!"

Her glance swept over her mother and went on to the fireplace.

"Oh, you've got a fire!"

"Yes," her mother said, "it seemed chilly—I don't know—these spring days—I love the spring, but—it seemed a little raw. I thought we'd like one."

It was a pitiful effort, that plural pronoun; but it spoke of some courage, and was something done.

"Bully!" said Marion going listlessly, slow foot after slow foot, to the fire.

She disengaged clatteringly the poker from the tongs and seating herself on a hassock facing the fire, began poking and breaking up the big lump of soft coal.

Her mother recognized a certain unspoken defiance that this might be said to stand for; because—oh, well, the extravagant breaking up of a large lump of coal when the room was already fully warm enough, for the mere improvident pleasure of seeing the released gas, as it rushed out, flare into windy flame, was childish; and for years now one of the important lessons to be impressed upon Marion had been that she must not be childish.

"Don't be childish, dear! You are getting to be a grown girl now!" That had been said, beginning when she was eleven or twelve, perhaps too frequently. It was Marion's father who had originated it, and his wife had kept up the fashion of it.

"Oh, getting to be a grown girl!" Marion had flung out one day, when she was about fifteen, "I *hate* being a grown girl! I *want* to be childish!"

"Perhaps so," her mother had said quietly, and not unkindly, "but I don't believe you should. Your father was right. You must grow up, you know, some day!" So she had maintained the absurd admonition when circumstances seemed to require it, as though it had a very real value.

She looked at Marion now, all slithered and humped together on the hassock, being "childish" again; but to-day she could not bring herself to a rebuke. It seemed to her, rather, that soft coal was made for Marion to break up, if she chose to.

What a slender little pathetic figure Marion was! Something of a fairy about her, too. And how absurdly bent the shoulders were, giving an unreal, wilful, fairy look in one so young.

In Helena McGrath's own girlhood days girls took a pride in holding their heads high, haughtily even. They looked you direct in the eye, if they did not look over the top of your head instead, and there were those among them whose grace was notable, they *glided!* Whereas the girls nowadays carried themselves like pothooks, their shoulders bent, their stomachs out, their arms limp and there wasn't a glide among them; they either minced on high heels or swung vulgarly from the hips like South Sea dancers. They did not carry themselves at all, really, but seemed rather to be carried along in that bent unlovely way like puppets, limp inert, waiting for the strings to be pulled. To see Marion really straighten up, and carry herself well would have been frightening almost, like seeing an inert doll come to life and step out into reality.

Marion looked into the fire, conscious of her mother's silence, but more conscious of a certain remoteness amounting to pathos, in which her mother so often seemed to sit enveloped. Marion's first sweeping glance as she came into the room gathered up this pathos fully, noting it. Her mother sitting there in the gathering twilight, pale and worn, sewing! Not sick looking at all, not that, but aging, clearly aging, year in year out. Oh, why were mothers so forever pathetic!

Then, her thought came back a little rebelliously to her own pathos, and her own need. Why, why were mothers so silent, so critical, so self-contained, so terribly sure of themselves, so utterly unable to enter into their daughters' lives? So unsympathetic . . . Heavens! Here she was with her heart full of pain and bitterness and there was her mother, only a few feet from her—and her mother a woman who presumably knew something of such things—yet Marion could no more have traversed that little space and flung herself at her mother's feet, as she longed to, than if iron chains had bound her.

If only her mother were not so vague, so neutral! If only she were vivid, moving, real, like the mothers who live in books! She thought of Mrs. March, in *Little Women*—now that sort of a mother . . . No, something better than that. Mrs. March was all right for the old-fashioned times in which she lived, but to have a mother who would be adequate now—the sort of mother who would make you feel that she *was* your mother . . .!

A wave of self-pity swept over her. She had thought in a wild way sometimes that she would force a new and different relation—would fling herself into it, would cry out wildly, "Oh, mother, mother, *mother*," and then everything old would melt—all the years of their being so reserved, and well behaved toward each other would roll

away like something in the Apocalypse, leaving a new heaven and a new earth and she would be folded in her mother's arms, and would sob and sob on her mother's heart, and her mother would smooth her hair, and say, "There! there! I know! I know!" Oh, the comfort of that, if only it could be!

Her eyes filled. She fumbled for her handkerchief, but before she found it the tears were already falling. She wiped the rest away, with little dabs that her mother could not have seen.

Helena McGrath, unsuspecting of tears at all, took another look at the bent shoulders of the slouchy little figure. If only the times had not changed so! If only the girls of to-day had something of the feelings of girls of her day. Why, she had longed, longed, mind you, to have her mother take her in her arms! Her mother had not been the kind who would, of course. No, but at least Helena would have done her part. She was not independent, and sullen, and cold, like the girls of to-day —like Marion.

If only some real and important issue would arise and bring them suddenly together! But it would not, in all likelihood. Marion's listlessness was probably due to some slight misunderstanding with Hervey Whitridge—hurt pride or something of the sort. But, if some real issue could arise. If she could find Marion some day, why, right there in that very room, on the hassock in front of the fire, as she was now—but really in need of her. If Marion would show some sign of need, no matter how small —why just Marion's eyes filling with tears—if ever that could be! And then —then!—she could see herself laying down her sewing hurriedly, and going to the child with a quick step, sureness, an indisputable right. And when she got to Marion, there on the hearth rug, she would slip down beside her and say, "But Marion! Marion! What is it, my darling!" And Marion would not be able to speak for tears. But that would not matter. It would be all the better. She would enfold Marion's little slender form. "Little Pigeon!" and she would wait for the tears to pass by; and meantime, she would stroke the child's head and say, "Little Dove! My dear! My dear!" And they two would be perfectly what it was their right to be; what they were meant to be—mother and daughter—an older woman ready to pour understanding and help out of the sorrow and experience of her heart, and a girl thirsty for these things.

She remembered Marion waking one night feverish when she was a little child. She remembered holding a cup of water for her, and the way Marion's lips had sucked the water in, her large eyes never leaving her mother's face. She could feel Marion's head against her heart, the way it used to be when Marion was little. How had they ever become separated as they were now? What jealous persistent trick of life had accomplished this thing slyly, unsuspectedly, day by day, year by year? Wide seas had indeed rolled between them since the "old long since" when she had held Marion, a baby in her arms, and Marion's baby hand had rested so imperially on her neck. It seemed like a dream, an absurd dream almost, that she really used to gather the little fingers and kiss and kiss and kiss them.

Marion's tears were still slipping over, still being wiped away secretly, but fewer of them; while to disguise the fact altogether, she poked the fire with her left hand.

Oh, but some mothers would understand, she thought wistfully, bitterly. If only her mother would come and sit there on the little old rosewood sofa and say, "Marion! Why my dear, what is the matter!" If only she would. But she wouldn't! You might as well expect the moon to come rolling down from the heavens!

Marion's mother let her sewing lie untouched in her lap. She began to dread the silence, silences were so cold,

so unsympathetic. Something must be said—something.

"Did you get the brown linen thread for your dress, dear?"

"No; they are to have it to-morrow," Marion answered.

She felt chilled, rebellious! Oh, *mothers!*

The room was still. That question of her mother's had the effect of suddenly cutting off all hope of sympathy. She knew now how ununderstanding her mother was. She had the sense of the closing of doors.

She got up, pulled her hat rakishly over her eyes to hide any redness of them.

"I'm going over to the gym for a while."

The door, when she went, closed with an unintentional bang after her.

Helena McGrath sat in the twilight alone.

Oh, Little Pigeon!

That evening a party of Marion's friends, swinging gay young people, who were laughing at everything as though it were nothing, and at nothing as though it were everything, lilted across the perfumed freshness of the April evening. They drifted, as by a nonchalant chance, into the McGrath house and were asked to stay and Helena brought out cookies for them. She was thankful they had come. In the midst of their gay chatter and banter (not very dignified, to be sure, Helena compared it with the gayety of evenings more mellow and courteous and restrained, shared by young people in her day) Marion's listlessness was almost sure to drop away. Hervey was there. He was indeed a tall and beautiful young man. She seemed to see that fact freshly, and it offered her a new hope. There was no one else there to compare with him, really; and for Marion and him to care for each other was the most natural thing in the world. And by and by they would marry, and Hervey's friendliness and gayety and ease would help matters immensely; and she would be to them such a mother as she had dreamed of being. There seemed promise of bright days ahead for her.

Then suddenly she felt as dull and bewildered as an owl in daylight. One of the girls was asking her if it wasn't wonderful and interesting that Hervey and little Jessica Manners were engaged! So then he was not in love with Marion after all. How could she have been so mistaken. But Marion—did Marion care for him? Was this the sorrow and the lagging step? Oh, yes. yes, of course!

It hurt her like a physical pain to see Marion's overeager manner, her feverish flushed effort toward brightness. Oh, after every one had gone, she would somehow get close to her and fold her to her heart. Helena had been hurt like that herself long ago. Now she would break the miserable chains.

There was another young man whose name she had forgotten. She had seen him often enough before, but had not liked him. Nothing so clear and frank and boyish about him as about Hervey. He seemed old, very old, though he was obviously young. Was it that he was too dashing, too sure of himself; not bold exactly, but a little too assured; she thought even a trifle cynical? He stood out among the rest, as more experienced. He limped slightly. And he had a way of half closing his eyes and smiling when Marion talked to him, as though he would hardly be bothered with listening to what she was saying, so eager was he to drink in, drink in and enjoy the beauty of her. He had a little free, possessive way with her, too, that disturbed and troubled Helena; and once when she was near them she heard him say to Marion, "Hello, little girl, did you drop this handkerchief?" and when she reached for it, he slipped it possessively into his coat and said, "Oh, no you don't! I'm going to keep it."

Well, the young people were gone now. Helena was very glad in a dim way to see

the limping young man go. He had said good-by with a long, too long look into Marion's eyes, and the remark half bold, half light? "Will you come? I'm in earnest. I mean it. I'll be there!" Then he had limped away—as Helena disapprovingly, remembered, with Marion's handkerchief in his pocket.

It was a comfort to be alone with the child again; to have her in her care; although the moment had not come, was indeed more than ever far away when she could break through the reserve that lay between them. Yet they kept close to each other. Once Marion stopped her, directing her.

"Don't, mother, don't put the chain up on the door. Don't you remember? Betty is out, at prayer meeting, or something."

"Oh, yes, to be sure, I forgot."

At her own door Marion put up her face to be kissed.

"Good-night, mother!"

"*Golubchik*,"—"little pigeon,"—"my darling," "dear heart"—all these swam through Helena McGrath's mind; but how absurd it would have been to use any of them.

"Good-night," she said and kissed her.

Marion did not undress or light the light. There was moonlight, white moonlight in the room. She lay down and turned her face to the pillow to shut it out. Her cheeks were hot and the tears on them hotter still. Once she turned her head in anguish as though to ease a hurt. Oh, if only, only her mother understood, and, understanding, if only her mother would come!

When she had lain so quite a while she heard her mother's voice in soft inquiry,

"Marion, are you awake?"

Marion held her breath, making no sound. She pretended to be asleep, and her heart hardened like stone. Oh, it would be unendurable to have her mother come and ask some commonplace question, when life was so bitter! What she longed for more than all the world was just to be loved, and held close.

The moon had come up high in the heavens now. The night was full of the odor of the lilac flowers in the garden, great massive bushes of them pouring out their fragrance in the white stillness. What a night, what a night for love, and the pouring out of the heart!

Getting no response when she stood at Marion's door, Helena McGrath had returned softly to her room, and had lain down, as roused by the white moonlight as Marion, but roused in a different way. How still and large and mysteriously open the night seemed; open and free, no chains anywhere! Spacious! Open! Then —— Was it a passing shadow, or a sound. She sat up, on the edge of her bed, aware suddenly of a figure on the balcony outside her room. Marion standing there in the moonlight.

"Marion, is that you?"

"Yes, mother."

She reached quickly for a white shawl that lay across the back of a chair, and stepped into the full clear free moonlight, with a kind of wonderment. Yet not wonderment. For she understood perfectly, perfectly. It was the moonlight night that had called to Marion so; called with an insistent longing, and beauty that must be obeyed; yet it was the moonlight night precisely, with its memories and its yearning, that Marion could not endure; that smote upon her heart and brought the tears into her eyes. Too beautiful, too dear.

"Marion, my dear."

"Yes"—without turning.

"It is chilly."

No reply.

"Let me put this shawl about you—my Beloved."

There! the word was used at last!

Marion submitted to have the white warmth put about her shoulders, but with her head still turned away. Then as Helena McGrath drew the soft woolly stuff together with trembling fingers, Marion turned. They looked full into each other's eyes.

Her mother opened her arms to her, and Marion slipped into them, slipped

into them, quickly, quickly, completely as a silver raindrop on a bright window pane slips and runs and is lost, is lost.

Helena held her close. They clung to each other, as she had thought some day they must do. Then, there was a smothered cry, half sob, against her heart.

"Oh, mother, mother! *Mother!*"

Helena bent to her and with one hand smoothed the fond head. It was a supreme moment. It was for this that all the years had been lived. Her life had not been wasted. It had not been a notable life in any way, but it had gathered suffering and knowledge as it went, and the suffering and knowledge were to be used; yes, were to be used.

Oh, the blessed thing it was to have the hateful chains broken at last! She put her lips to Marion's hair.

"Little Pigeon, dear heart! My dear! You don't have to speak. I know, I know, Beloved!"

Finally, the drooping head was raised.

"Oh, mother, I never knew you'd know! How wonderful!"

"Well, there, there! I do, I do! It's the moonlight you love, my Precious, but that you can't quite stand!"

Marion nodded and hid her face anew.

"It hurts," she murmured.

"Yes, exactly! I know, my Beloved!"

Something—was it the slight clank of a chain—broke on the stillness. They were disturbed. The sound roused them, gradually separated them.

"What was that?"

Helena came back to reality as from some spell. Of course! It was very probably Betty coming home, and that was the click of the swinging chain on the front door.

She drew a hand across her eyes, and looked about her. What had happened? The balcony was empty. Marion, shy of the unwonted scene, had fled, but she herself had fled, too. She was not on the balcony. She was——

She felt the nearest object in a quick startled manner. A cool fabric met the tips of her fingers. She turned and saw what it was she felt. The cool white of her pillow! She sat up farther, with a start; in the full moonlight. She had not then been on the balcony at all! This had been only a dream! (What a fearful thing!) That dear, that satisfying moment, that epitome of all her life had had no reality—no reality!

Accepting this slowly, but fully, at last, she sat absorbed in a dull defeated despair on the edge of her bed. Perhaps her husband had been right. What was it that she wanted, after all? Impossible things, perhaps; foolish things, no doubt!

At last she began unfastening her clothes; slipped out of them, and into her nightdress; knelt for the habitual short prayers she always said, then rose and lay down. She looked longingly for a while at the moon. How she had loved the moon when she was Marion's age! Then she closed her eyes; really very tired. After all, life must be accepted as it is. And a girl's reticence must be respected. She had always been so reticent herself. Yet it was good even in a dream once to have called the child "Little Pigeon."

Marion closed the front door with great care, that the chain might not swing again. The moonlight was whiter, if that were possible, whiter than ever on the porch. And down the two steps, and across the path, the lilacs—great branched plumed bushes of silver, in a silent silver land—were pouring, pouring, pouring out perfume! What a night! What a night for love, and the pouring out of the heart!

In the deep shadow of the perfumed lilacs, a dark form moved slightly, yes, came toward her, with a slight limp.

The next moment her hands were in his and he was bending to her boldly, delightedly, possessively.

"Hello, little girl! I said I'd be here! I was in earnest! I meant it!"

He folded her passionately to him.